

by Peter Stone Brown

The Rolling Thunder Revue blazed a crazy wake-up call across the New England autumn, shaking up an otherwise bleak pre-bicentennial November. And somehow, through one of those little bits of magic that seems to happen with Bob Dylan, I was lucky enough to see a show though I lived hundreds of miles away. Someone knew someone and somehow tickets came into the hands of my friends and myself. And somehow we borrowed someone's parent's car and arrived in plenty of time at the Hartford Civic Center, a huge arena structure right in the middle of a mall. And somehow the kid who had scored us the tickets knew who we were and showed up just in time with some divine inspiration and we went in to take our seats. And even though the Hartford Civic Center was not the little theaters we'd read about, there was real excitement in the air. Allen Ginsberg was wandering around and sitting down the row in the next section was Rick Danko of The Band.

The lights went down and suddenly this band was on stage, and I don't know if band is really the right word. It was a madman conglomeration of half cowboys and half clowns, dressed up, made up and rocking from the start, with Bobby Neuwirth was growling out something. It didn't even matter what the songs were.

"Welcome to your living room," Neuwirth, who has handling double-duty as MC rasped.

"Dylan" someone yelled.

"Who's Dylan?" Neuwirth barked back.

And it turned out to be a real revue, as each member stepped up to the mike to sing. And we didn't know who these people were and it didn't matter, but we sure found out. David Mansfield in a red cowboy hat at the pedal steel. T-Bone Burnett mysterious behind a Les Paul guitar in a wizard's costume.

And all of a sudden, "We have a special guest," and Rick Danko appears with Ginsberg on tambourine introducing "It Makes No Difference," and Neuwirth says, "Let's bring out another Canadian, Joni Mitchell." The place goes completely crazy and the energy meter shoots way past 100. As Mitchell leaves, Neuwirth sings something that sounds like Jimmie Rodgers except the words are "I've got a friend named Ramblin' Jack" and out comes Jack Elliott, cowboy to the hilt, stars painted on his cheeks, chaps on his pants, yodeling "Mule Skinner Blues" and all thoughts of shopping malls and arenas are long gone.

He appeared out of nowhere as Ramblin' Jack walked off. There might have been a puff of smoke. I'm still not sure. But there he was and there was no doubt about it. The white face underneath the flowered cowboy hat, his eyes (as one of my traveling companions said) "like beacons," into some madman version of "When I Paint My Masterpiece." Everything's happening really fast, and no matter what, all eyes are on him. His voice is kind of hoarse, but it doesn't matter 'cause he doesn't stop moving and each word is a once-in-a-lifetime moment. And into "Tonight I'll Be Staying Here With You," except the ticket that went out the window is now a TV and the suitcase that followed it is a mattress and the poor boy on the street is a trucker on the road. And then it's "Hard Rain" except it's a rocked up blues with a sped up "Hoochie Coochie Man" riff following each "where have you been?" And then guitarless into some wild gypsy dance for "Isis" and the curtain comes down.

You could hear the guitars strumming before the curtain came up and there they were, Dylan and Baez together again singing "Blowin' In The Wind," and for me it brought back the one time I saw them together 11 years before at Philharmonic Hall in New York City, except it was a decade later and a different time and I was seeing something I never thought I'd see again. And the next song almost seemed like it was gonna be "Times They Are A-Changin'," except after the first line it turned into the old Merle Travis song "Dark As a Dungeon," and then another echo of Philharmonic, "Mama You Been On My Mind."

Then Baez does a set, the highlight of course "Diamonds and Rust," and now it's her turn to MC and she has her share of surprise guests, like Sandy Bull, mysterious instrumentalist from the '60s, playing the oud on some kind of blitzed out raga and everyone is dancing on-stage is dancing around.

And then Baez brings on Roger McGuinn and he's into the most heavy duty version ever of "Eight Miles High" trading sonic guitar duets with Mick Ronson, easing down into "Chestnut Mare," and suddenly T-Bone Burnett is a cowboy instead of a wizard and he's doing rope tricks and he's got a lasso going and ropes McGuinn at the song's conclusion.

And then he's back, alone this time, harmonica holder around his neck, sitting on a stool for "Love Minus Zero" and "Simple Twist of Fate." And that "it's really him" feeling keeps darting across my mind like some flashing sign, and the band comes back and it's time for new songs, "Oh Sister," and "Hurricane" and he's breaking strings

like a madman, changing guitars in between lines and never missing a beat.

And Dylan was never more masterful, mystical and magical, playing all his roles at once, while adding new ones--each with a sense of timelessness, backed by a knowing intensity, the poet, the clown, the actor and the minstrel, with that dead-on, laser beam, magnetism that makes the song and performance the only thing you know about while it's happening, grabbing total hold on your heart, soul and spine.